Chapter 1   Introduction

The City of Harrisonburg Comprehensive Plan presents a vision of what kind of community the City would like to be in the future and identifies the steps required to move toward that vision. The Plan provides information about the City's current conditions, long-term goals and objectives, and recommended implementation strategies. It addresses a wide range of issues, including land use, housing, transportation, infrastructure, the preservation of historic and natural resources, and economic development.

As a long-term guide for the community, the Plan helps City leaders make decisions about the location, scale, and quality of new development; the improvement of neighborhoods and commercial areas; the revitalization of downtown and surrounding historic areas; the extension and upgrade of roads and utilities; and the future of the City's parks, public spaces, and natural areas.

Known as the "City with the Planned Future," Harrisonburg has a long tradition of public planning, and this plan builds on previous comprehensive plans adopted by the City. This plan is adopted to set the City's growth and development policies for the next five years within a long-term planning horizon of twenty years. The City Council expects to consider revisions to the plan, particularly at its next review in five years. In the meantime, this plan is meant to set the City on a course toward meeting its long-term vision as articulated in detail in Chapter 2.

Value and Importance of a Comprehensive Plan
The Comprehensive plan is one of the most essential documents produced by a local government. The Commonwealth of Virginia requires, in Section 15.2-2223 of the State Code, that every community prepare and adopt a comprehensive plan to guide its future growth and development. This plan must be kept up to date; state law requires the planning commission to review the plan at least once every five years.

The Plan is important because it is both comprehensive and it is long term. It helps to coordinate most City activities by examining them all together at one time - a comprehensive approach. In this way, transportation is coordinated with decisions on new development, which in turn can be accommodated by planned improvements to water and sewer service. At the same time valued historic and natural resources are known and considered. Adopting and publishing a plan advertises the City's desires to others, allowing the public and the state and federal governments to know the City's development policies. A long-term view is necessary, so that short-term solutions to respond to a crisis do not preclude the City from reaching its long-term goals.

The Plan as a Guide
It is important for citizens to realize that while the Plan is important, it is only a guide. It is not a regulating document. It is not the law. Rather, it is a policy document used by the Planning Commission and the City Council to guide decisions about such issues as rezoning proposals, the location of new roads, investments in water and sewer improvements, and the development of parks. The Plan is implemented by the City through the Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances, the Design and Construction Standards Manual, the City Code, the Capital Improvement Program, and the annual budget.

A Community-Based Comprehensive Plan
Early in 2009, Planning Commission analyzed the 2004 Comprehensive Plan, and determined it was still relevant but that it should be modified to reflect the City's latest ideals and to adapt the Plan to the changes that have occurred since February 2004. Unlike the 2004 Comprehensive Plan update process, where the City contracted with a consultant to help with the implementation of the update, Planning Commission decided this revision should be conducted by the Commission and City staff. Planning staff collaborated with other City departments during the summer months of 2009 to update quantitative and qualitative data for Planning Commission to review. Throughout the fall and winter of 2009, Planning Commission analyzed the updated information and performed a "status check" of the Plan's goals, objectives, and strategies prior to collecting public input.

To ensure the Plan reflected the community's ideology and guide for the future, Planning Commission focused on reaching out and engaging residents by holding public input sessions once a week, for four weeks in the Spring of 2010. The sessions occurred between April 29th and May 19th 2010, from 7:00 – 9:00 p.m. at the Lucy F. Simms Center for Continuing Education. The location and schedule were strategically planned to create a neutral and welcoming environment at times when the weather is typically pleasant and while the City's colleges were still in session.

Each evening, Planning Commission wanted to collect feedback on specific information; therefore, the evenings were divided by topic and chapter. The schedule occurred as follows:

- Thursday, April 29th – Land Use and Transportation, Chapters 5, 6, & 11
- Wednesday, May 5th – Natural Resources & Community and Safety Issues, Chapters 9, 10, 12, & 13
- Thursday, May 13th – Cultural Resources & Revitalization, Chapters 7, 8, 13, & 14
- Wednesday, May 19th – Housing and Collaboration, Chapters 6, 12, & 15

Planning Commission then held several worksessions to review all of the comments collected during the public input sessions and made changes to the Plan based upon the collected information. One worksession focused exclusively on the Land Use Guide, where Planning Commission recommended multiple properties be re-designated to different land uses.

Once the Plan was in a complete draft form, Planning Commission held a public hearing on April 13, 2011, where it was recommended to City Council for approval. City Council adopted the plan on May 10, 2011.

Plan Organization
The layout, the delivery, and some of the information in this plan is similar, and in some cases, exactly the same as the 2004 update as the review of that information proved relevant and consistent with the City's vision. This Plan is organized for the convenience of both the general reader and those with questions about detailed recommendations in specific topic areas. For the general reader, the plan includes an Executive Summary, then this Introduction (Chapter 1) and a presentation of the City's Vision and Goals (Chapter 2). Following these opening chapters are

the more detailed elements of the plan. Chapter 3 presents data on population and income to provide the Planning Context. Chapter 4 gives the overall framework for planning in Harrisonburg through an illustrative map and text. The Plan Framework Map illustrates the City's general pattern of development and highlights areas where some degree of change is encouraged or anticipated. Following the Plan Framework are the chapters dealing with specific topic areas, referred to as "plan elements." All Plan chapters are listed below:

Chapter 1   Introduction
Chapter 2   Vision & Goals
Chapter 3   Planning Context
Chapter 4   Plan Framework
Chapter 5   Land Use & Development Quality
Chapter 6   Neighborhoods & Housing
Chapter 7   Education
Chapter 8   Arts, Culture, & Historic Resources
Chapter 9   Natural Resources
Chapter 10   Parks & Recreation
Chapter 11   Transportation
Chapter 12   Community Infrastructure, Services, Safety & Health
Chapter 13   Economic Development & Tourism
Chapter 14   Revitalization
Chapter 15   Community Engagement & Collaboration
Chapter 16   Implementation

The order in which the plan elements are presented does not imply any priority or order of importance. It is important for users of the plan to recognize that all the elements are interrelated.

Each element of the plan covered in Chapters 5 – 16 contains one or more long-term goals, the same goals as listed in Chapter 2, as well as more detailed objectives and strategies designed to implement the goals. The strategies are the most detailed recommendations of the plan and include specific projects, programs, initiatives, and investments that the City should undertake.

Although each individual strategy is important in achieving the vision, it is necessary to identify priorities and responsibilities for early implementation. Chapter 16, the final chapter, lists initial actions outlined in a five-year implementation program.